Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005
Volume 4 1997:112-137
Publication date: 19 February 1997

# Masao Abe, Zen Buddhism and Social Ethics

Daniel Palmer

*Department of Philosophy*
*Purdue University*
email: dpalmer@expert.cc.purdue.edu

## I. Introduction

In the last few decades, Masao Abe has emerged as the leading exponent of Zen Buddhism in the West. Trained in the Koyoto School of Japanese philosophy, Abe has, however, not sought merely to transmit passively the basic precepts of Zen Buddhism. Rather, following the tradition of the Koyoto School, Abe has sought to rework and transform these doctrines in dialogical encounter with both Western philosophy and religion, and with contemporary secular ideologies that are hostile towards the very existence of all forms of religion. In doing so, Abe does not shirk from taking seriously the problems and challenges posed to the traditional framework of Zen Buddhism by these other forms of understanding. Indeed, in a response to Abe's seminal essay "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," John Cobb, Jr. remarks that:

> Abe acknowledges that the criticisms have not expressed mere misunderstanding. He does not belittle them as showing that the critics are dealing only with secondary matters. He acknowledges their force and proposes ways in which Buddhism can and should deal with them.[1]

For Abe, if traditional forms of religion such as Zen Buddhism or Christianity are to survive at all in the context of our multi-cultural and technological era, it must be on the basis of a mutual transformation of basic concepts in the light of an ongoing dialogue with each other and with the various forms of critical rationality that are also prevalent in society.[2]

Abe's efforts in this direction are paradigmatic for the development of Buddhism within the West. Indeed, I would argue that if Buddhism is to become a viable force in Western culture it must continue to engage in the kind of critical and dialectical inquiry that is the hallmark of Abe's method for a number of reasons. First, in taking seriously both

traditional Buddhist concepts and the Western forms of understanding that often stand in apparent opposition to them, Abe reminds us that a viable form of Western Buddhism must avoid the extremes of either simply interpreting Buddhism in terms of one or another set of Western categories or adopting Buddhism as a form of exoticism and escapism. A viable Western Buddhism must both be respectful of its own traditions and adaptable to the unique situation, both conceptually and practically, that is found in the West. Abe shows us that Buddhism has both something to offer and something to gain from its adaptation to the West. More importantly perhaps, Abe's dialogical method is of paramount importance for Western Buddhism precisely because the situation in the West (socially, economically, politically, and so forth) is quite different from that of the East. As such, if Buddhism is to thrive in the Western context it must address the unique concerns and problems that are presently being faced in the West.

Therefore, while there are of course a number of criticisms of Buddhism that have emerged in its confrontation with other forms of understanding, here I will focus upon one particular set of criticisms that has been historically directed at Buddhism from a number of fronts that I believe is of particular importance for Western Buddhism. These criticisms concern the perceived inability of Buddhism to issue concrete social critique and to develop a positive social ethic. It seems to me that as the discourse in the West comes to focus more upon social issues any form of understanding that is to remain alive must be able to respond to such concerns, and thus that if Western Buddhism is to survive it must illustrate how it can address these issues. I will argue that Abe does recognize that this has been an area in which Buddhism has been traditionally deficient, but that by reinterpreting several key Buddhist concepts Abe offers a new paradigm of Buddhism that does allow for the possibility of social critique while still retaining the essential insights of traditional Zen Buddhism. In the first section of the paper I will develop the specific nature of the criticisms in relation to the traditional understanding of Buddhist doctrine. In the second section I will show how

Abe's transvaluation of Zen Buddhism in light of his dialogical hermeneutic takes account of these criticisms and develops the resources within Zen thought to deal with them.

## II. Buddhism and Social Ethics, Traditional Difficulties

That Buddhism has historically been perceived by outside observers as lacking a significant social ethic is undeniable. The alleged lack of a positive social philosophy in Zen Buddhism was already present, as James Whitehill points out, in the eleventh-century Neo-Confucian critique of Buddhism that took "Buddhism as inimical to such [social] values and even a threat to civilized life."[3] Such claims have been repeatedly proffered until the present day, the charges usually claiming that Buddhism in general, and Zen in particular, undermines the very possibility of social critique and reform due to its essentially inward orientation, escapist attitude, and its undermining of all substantial distinctions. In terms of popular culture, this has translated into the prevelant Western image of the Buddhist as a solitary individual completely detached (often represented in terms of a physical separation, i.e. the monk sitting atop the mountain) from the concerns of the world who occasionally dispenses obscure sayings. We should point out that the general claim that Zen Buddhism lacks a social ethic actually involves two quite distinct charges. First, there is the question of the actual historical record concerning Zen and social agency; whether or not Zen Buddhists have in fact adopted means of social critique and reform. But there is also the question as to whether, despite whatever the historical situation might be, the essential doctrines of Zen Buddhism are theoretically compatible with the development of a social ethic.

As to the first question, there can be no doubt that Zen Buddhists have traditionally shown a lack of significant reflection and action upon social problems. Christopher Ives notes in this regard that:

> Historically, monastic Zen has not studied, analyzed, or responded self-critically to the full range of suffering in the social world. This lack of critical spirit has contributed to problematic support of the status quo, whether the aristocracy, samurai dictators, militarists, or certain large corporations.[4]

Even Abe is quick to admit that in the past there has been a tendency on the part of Buddhists to adopt an "apathetic attitude toward social evil."[5] There are no doubt numerous factors for this historical deficiency on the part of Buddhism, including the monastic focus mentioned in the above quote by Ives and perhaps even the very cultural adaptability that has been characteristic of Buddhism's mode of transmission. That is, as Winston King points out, the accommodating nature of Buddhism to diverse cultural contexts "has led it to accept the dominant forms of social organization in the countries it has penetrated."[6] Perhaps this can best be seen in the present historical context, where in the West Buddhism has often been adopted as an individualistic and therapeutic response to the pressures of modern society. Thus, once again, Buddhism comes to be seen as a form of escapism from the larger social world; a means of leaving the problems of social reality behind rather than an attempt to work constructively within society. The above comments are not meant to suggest that historically no individual Buddhists or Buddhist communities have been involved in concrete social reform; certainly there are numerous examples of such socially engaged Buddhists.[7] Rather, I merely wish to point out that both Buddhists and non-Buddhists have perceived a deficiency on the part of Buddhism to offer sustained and systematic reflection on and articulation of a concrete social ethics.

However, as the thrust of this paper is philosophical and not historical I will not dwell on the issue of the historical dimension of the claims concerning Buddhism and social critique. Much more important is the question as to whether, given the essential doctrines of Zen Bud-

dhism, it is theoretically possible for Buddhism to develop in such directions. That is, it might be the case that historically Buddhism has lacked any clearly formulated social ethic, and yet still contain the inner conceptual resources to formulate such analyses. The second kind of charge against Buddhism is more foundational as it concerns the very conceptual coherency of the idea of a Buddhist social ethic. Lee Stauffer, who is careful to distinguish between the two sorts of claims, thus argues against the possibility of any kind of Zen ethics based on its doctrine of nondiscrimination.[8] And we will see that the second sorts of criticisms of Zen are best seen as based on the claim that one or another of a few basic Buddhist concepts are such that they make the development of any substantial social philosophy impossible. Therefore, in the remainder of this section I will examine some criticisms that have been voiced concerning several key Buddhist doctrines in regard to their compatibility with the possibility of social critique. In doing so, the following remarks are by no means intended to be anything like an exhaustive treatment of the operative concepts, as I will explicate them only in relation to the criticisms that have been leveled against them.

One such concept within the Buddhist framework that has been seen as inimical to the development of social critique is the notion of karma. Abe remarks that "karma means act or deed" and is primarily to be understood as "mental activity oriented by volition."[9] The basic Buddhist idea is that each such act has further consequences for the individual based on the motives, disposition and character of the person who committed that act as well as the circumstances in which it was performed. The cumulative consequences are such that the karmic effect of one's own actions determines one's future. Thus, following Padmasiri De Silva we can think of karma as a type of "moral causation" in which a person's future fate is determined on the basis of their past moral actions.[10] In even simpler terms, D.T. Suzuki states that "the principle of karma is 'whatever a man sows that he also reaps' and this governs the whole life of the Buddhist."[11] We have then a core Buddhist notion that is essentially a moral notion, concerning the ethical status of

one's actions and the consequences that such actions have upon one's life.

However, despite the fact that the traditional Buddhist notion of karma is essentially a moral concept concerning the effects of one's ethical behavior, its applicability to social ethics is mitigated by several factors. First, by thinking of karma as a type of causation in which an individual's present state is determined by their past moral actions, there is an obvious tendency to think of the present condition of persons, including their present social condition, as being the necessary result of their own previous actions. One introductory Zen Buddhist text thus states that "all states and conditions in this life are the direct result of previous actions and each action in the present determines the fate of the future."[12] Similarly, Winston King states as the rule of karma:

> that one's present state and character are solely his/her own responsibility. Every one is the result of one's own past deeds. This tends to produce a certain fatalism so far as one's present life is concerned.[13]

The basic criticism is thus that the very notion of karma undermines the need for social critique since it entails that an individual's present situation, including their situation within society, is the inextricable result of their own past actions. Likewise, it can be argued that by taking karma as a type of moral causality Buddhists obviate the need to develop real social critique because they have a fail-safe ontological mechanism already build into their system that guarantees that good actions will be rewarded and bad ones punished. Winston King reflects this kind of criticism in remarking that:

> karma is Justice incarnate ... The mills of karma may grind slowly but they grind with absolute moral fineness ... Hence in the Buddhist world there is no pressing need for *human* enforcement of the standards of right and wrong, or the imposition of "just"

> punishments upon the wicked.[14]

If the mechanisms of karma always ensure, using Susuki's metaphor, that "one reaps what one sows," what need is there for any humanly enforced social mechanisms for the righting of individual wrong, the enforcement of justice, or the improvement of material conditions?

Not only does the operation of karma seem to make the social function of retribution and reward superfluous, but the very individualistic framework in which karma has traditionally been explicated tends to enforce the claim that the Buddhist tradition is too narrowly focused to take much notice of social factors. Karma, as we have been delimiting it so far, is concerned solely with individual actions and consequences, narrowly accenting the effects of actions upon individuals. Thus, in Zen Buddhism the idea appears to be to focus wholly upon one's own actions in order to ultimately free oneself from the chains of karmic retribution, without any consideration for the role that social factors play in determining an individual's situation. This leads naturally to an accent on individual releasement from the difficulties of worldly existence, and thus to the goal of Buddhist life, nirvana, that we will turn to next.

If karma is the basic Buddhist moral concept, then we might ask; what is the Buddhist solution or response to the kind of moral issues embodied in their notion of karma? The answer to this question is crucial, for the "supreme good or value in an ethical tradition ... determines the nature of the total ethical structure in the final analysis."[15] Thus, in the Western monotheistic tradition it is ultimately the will of God that grounds the ethical behavior of the participants. In comparison, we can follow King in affirming that as to this ultimate good "there can be no doubt in Buddhism: its name is Nirvana."[16] Abe himself has made the following observation on the ultimate end of Buddhism:

> The fundamental aim of Buddhism is to attain emancipation from all bondage arising from the duality of life and death. Another word for this is *saṃsāra*, which is also linked to the dualities of

> right and wrong, good and evil, etc. Emancipation from *saṃsāra* by transcending the duality of birth and death is called *nirvana*, the goal of Buddhist life.[17]

Nirvana is traditionally taken to represent the final aim or end of Buddhist life; the goal toward which all Buddhist life is ultimately directed. However, the concern has often been raised that this very end that structures Buddhist life is incompatible with the formation of any social ethic. This criticism actually runs in two directions, each of which we will examine in turn.

First, the notion of nirvana must be understood in relation to another Buddhist notion, that of *saṃsāra*. *Saṃsāra* represents the ordinary world in which we live, the world of birth and death, pleasures and pain, strife and struggle. Now according to the first noble truth of Buddhism, this world is a world of suffering. Not that we never experience pleasure or happiness, certainly Buddhists will recognize that we do so often. Rather, Buddhism suggests that ultimately even such ordinary joys lead to a deeper suffering (termed *duḥkha*) that is caused by our very attachment to the things in which we find such pleasure and security. As Christopher Ives puts it;

> because all things inevitably change, people experience unnecessary pain to the extent that they take themselves to be permanent or clutch to things and situations deemed necessary for fulfillment.[18]

According to Buddhism everything is part of a larger process of birth and decay, through which things come into being and then pass away. Likewise all distinctions, such as those between pleasure and pain or good and evil, are also always relative to a particular set of circumstances within this larger process. Thus in becoming attached to things, whether it be material things or emotional states like pleasure or even to the self, we end up substantializing them and taking their reality

as absolute. But within the Buddhist framework such attachments will always lead to suffering in the end because ultimately all of these things are transitory and their absolute being illusory. Thus, Buddhism takes it that we must overcome these cravings and attachments that can never be satisfied, and in the Mahayana tradition nirvana is precisely this "existential awakening to egolessness ...*from* attachment to the dualistic view that distinguishes pleasure as something to be sought after and suffering as something to be avoided."[19] As I mentioned, however, two pertinent questions might be raised as to how this notion of nirvana as the goal that drives the Buddhist's worldview can be made compatible with any type of systematic social critique and reform.

One issue turns again on the individualistic interpretation that is usually given to nirvana. That is, in the Zen tradition where nirvana is taken to represent a kind of existential awakening to the non-substantiality of the mundane world there is a definite focus upon the individual's experience that some have claimed is asocial by nature. The goal of nirvana seems to be a personal goal, involving an existential awareness of the real nature of things and a release from one's own karmic chains. Therefore, by focusing on the experience of nirvana as such, traditional conceptions of Zen have made it difficult to see how such personal transformation might possibly translate into any kind of substantial social transformation.

Second, while the Zen notion of nirvana, unlike the Theravāda one, does not take nirvana to be a literal plane of existence separate from the mundane world of *saṃsāra* but instead sees nirvana in terms of an existential realization within this one world of the real nature of things, it does still seem to suggest that the quest for nirvana involves some kind of an abandonment of the world of *saṃsāra*. Indeed, it would seem that any focus on the social world around one would further entangle the Zen practitioner in the kind of distinctions and attachments that he or she is seeking to overcome. The kind of existential realization that Zen offers in its notion of nirvana appears to remove its adepts from any possible involvement in the social sphere precisely because real involve-

ment in those concerns presupposes making the kind of commitments and distinctions that Zen seeks to overcome as its ultimate goal. The social world, by its very nature, belongs to the world of *saṃsāra* and it is thus seems that if nirvana is the goal of Buddhist life, and nirvana involves an overcoming of the distinctions within that world, then it would follow that the social world with all of its distinctions and involvements is ultimately beyond the sphere of Buddhist conceptualization. Social problems appear to be problems that are necessarily rooted in the contingent fleeting world of *saṃsāra* and thus appear to be something the Buddhist must ultimately leave behind.

Closely related to the concept of nirvana is another central Buddhist notion, that of *śūnyatā* or absolute emptiness. Indeed, they are often taken as equivalent. However, for our purposes it might be useful to distinguish the two terms in the following manner. We might say that if nirvana represents the existential awakening to the true nature of things, then *śūnyatā* designates the ultimate ontological reality that one is awakened to. As Masao Abe states it:

> the ultimate reality for Buddhism is neither Being nor God, but Sunyata. Sunyata literally means "emptiness" or "voideness" and can imply "absolute nothingness."[20]

Earlier, we mentioned that Buddhists take the universe to consist ultimately in an ongoing process of generation and degeneration in which nothing is absolute. *Śūnyatā* thus represents the ultimate unsubstantiality of all things according to Buddhism; the Buddhist recognition that the self and the objects of perception are empty of self-existence. Christopher Ives encapsulates this view of *śūnyatā* nicely in remarking that "as a logical and metaphysical term, *śūnyatā* indicates both the lack of any independent essence or self in things and the interrelational dynamism that constitutes things."[21] There are really then two aspects concerning the ultimate nature of things that the notion of *śūnyatā* takes into account. First, there is the Buddhist idea that nothing exists independently

or subsists on its own, rather everything is what it is in virtue of its causal interrelationships with other things. Here we have the Buddhist notion of co-dependent origination. Second, there is the idea that nothing in these networks of things is stable, as everything is subject to the process of generation and decay. Abe summarizes the view of ontological reality that *śūnyatā* is meant to capture in saying that "the universe is not the creation of God, but fundamentally is a network of causal relationships among innumerable things which are co-arising and co-ceasing."[22] *Śūnyatā* as absolute emptiness thus signifies both this process of emptying (by which all entities are ceaselessly transformed) and the lack of any stable, self-subsistent entities or principles that we might take as ontologically basic.

As to be expected, the doctrine of *śūnyatā* has also come under critical scrutiny in its encounter with other modes of thought. In maintaining that ultimately all conditioned reality is of the same ontological status, the Zen notion of *śūnyatā* seems to erode the possibility of distinguishing between various contingent social arrays. It seems that Zen can provide no criteria for privileging one contingent state of affairs over another, since they are all ontologically equivalent. The very attempt to establish one contingent assemblage in preference to another would seem to involve some substantial criteria.

Second, in so far as the Buddhist notion of *śūnyatā* stresses the interdependence and non-substantiality of all reality, it implies that it is not only objects or states of affairs that lack any independent reality, but that principles, values or ideals lack any substantial reality as well. Such values are also emptied by the Buddhist, leaving us with no privileged imperatives to guide our ethical choices. As Lee Stauffer puts it, "Zen has as a major doctrine the principle of nondiscrimination, and this principle is meant to include the discrimination inherent in ethical choices."[23] Abe admits that even good and evil are interdependent, relative and contingent: "Buddhists generally talk about the complete relativity of good and evil and reject the idea of the priority of one over the other."[24] The doctrine of *śūnyatā* thus undermines the notion that there could be any

morally objective values and in doing so seems to leave us with no criteria to appeal to in adjudicating claims of social justice. A Buddhist social ethics must show how the Buddhist can reject any ultimate moral criteria and yet still allow for constructive social criticism.

In the preceding section I have tried to show how various criticisms concerning the social import of Zen Buddhism have been made in relation to certain central Buddhist tenets. In particular, I examined these criticisms in relation to the Buddhist notions of karma, nirvana, and *śūnyatā*. This treatment was in no way intended to be exhaustive. Rather, my project was limited to attempting to show what appear to be some *prima facie* incompatibilities between these concepts and the elaboration of any systematic social philosophy. The goal was to bring to light what detractors of Buddhism see as a conceptual incoherency in the very idea of a Zen social philosophy. And, it seems to me that any such criticisms must be addressed by any serious discussion of Zen and social philosophy. Thus, in the following section I will turn to the recent work of Masao Abe in order to see how his reworking of basic Zen doctrines can be seen as a response to this challenge.

## III. Abe and the Social Force of Zen

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Masao Abe is well aware of the traditional criticisms of Buddhism, including criticisms concerning its social applicability. And, Abe does not merely dismiss such criticisms as irrelevant. Rather, Abe accepts that such criticisms do point to some real difficulties embodied in the traditional understanding of Buddhism. However, Abe also believes that in dialogical response to such critiques we can transform our understanding of basic Buddhist concepts in such a way as to overcome the challenges that they pose. While Abe does not specifically or systematically respond to all of the issues that I have outlined concerning the social force of Buddhism, he does provide a new paradigm for Zen Buddhism that I believe allows us to

see how Western Buddhists might develop a coherent and methodical social philosophy. In the remainder of this paper I will thus attempt to show how Abe's position might be used to effectively overcome the traditional problems raised concerning Zen's social impact.

In approaching the Buddhist notions of karma, nirvana, and *śūnyatā* in light of the traditional criticisms outlined above, Abe offers what I take as three strategies of interpretation for creatively transvaluing these central Buddhist doctrines. I will argue that by utilizing these hermeneutic tactics Abe is able to explicate the nature of karma, nirvana and *śūnyatā* in such a way as to overcome the typical criticisms and to uncover a positive social aspect of Zen Buddhism. I will explicate each of these interpretive strategies and show how they relate to the criticisms of the essential Buddhist doctrines that we delineated previously.

One theme that ran through almost all of the criticisms that we looked at previously concerning the social applicability of Zen concerned its alleged individualistic and escapist attitude. Thus, we saw that the problem of karma has often been taken in an excessively individualistic manner that led to an isolation of individuals from their social context. Likewise, when nirvana is interpreted in a personalistic way, it seems to imply that the goal of Buddhist life is an isolation from the world of *saṃsāra* with all of its various social bonds. The challenge, we saw, was to see if we could show that the narrowly individualistic interpretation of these Buddhist notions is a distortion that overlooks the social aspect of Zen doctrine. And this is, I think, precisely what Abe does in his own exposition of Zen Buddhism.

For Abe, the first key to discerning the social force of Zen is to begin any treatment of Buddhist doctrines by stressing the idea of interdependence that is central to Zen metaphysics. We saw in our exposition of the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, or absolute nothingness, that *śūnyatā* signifies the complete interdependence of all reality and the lack of any independent essence to things. It is no surprise that in his writings Abe has most often begun his exposition of the Zen position with the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, say rather than with the doctrine of karma or nirvana,

because for Abe the recognition of the interdependence of all things is at the heart of the Buddhist worldview. *Śūnyatā* does not, as Abe points out, signify a substantial nothingness apart from the everyday world of distinctions, but refers to the unsubstantiality of that very world; he thus states that *śūnyatā* should be translated "with the gerund 'self-emptying' rather than the nominal 'emptiness.'"[25] Thus, any discussion of Buddhist doctrine must be carried out in terms of an acknowledgment of the dynamic interdependence that is, for Zen, constitutive of all reality. Below, I will show several ways in which taking this dynamic interdependence into consideration can vitiate the traditional criticisms that we examined earlier.

In his discussion of karma, Abe states "that the Buddhist notion of karma ... does not imply an exclusively individualistic view of karma."[26] He further notes that "the Buddhist view of karma is ultimately rooted in *avidyā*—that is, of emptiness and suchness, resulting in not recognizing the impermanency of worldly things and tenaciously clinging to them as final reality."[27] This implies that the self-binding character of karma results precisely from failing to recognize the dynamic interdependence of all things; that is, from our tendency to substantialize things, including our own ego. Far from being individualistic then, the Zen doctrine of karma can be seen as pointing out the fruitlessness of creative action as long as we act in ways that are based upon a substantializing of individual things. Seen this way, the doctrine of karma is meant to diagnose the individualism that prevents us from recognizing the interdependence and unsubstantiality of all things. Further, the release from karma, in the attainment of nirvana, signifies the escape *from* the fundamental ignorance that causes us to see ourselves and our actions as separate from the lives of others. As Abe states it, "only when this fundamental ignorance is overcome and the self-centeredness involved in karma is broken, can one awaken to the true nature of things."[28]

We might note here also that once the interdependence of all reality is accepted, it entails that even the interdependence of *saṃsāra* and nirvana must be realized as well. To take the experience of nirvana as

independent of the world of *saṃsāra* would be to substantialize the nirvanic experience itself. In this regard Abe states that:

> If one abides in so-called *nirvana* by transcending *samsara*, one is not yet free from attachment, namely, attachment to *nirvana* itself. Being confined by the discrimination between *nirvana* and *samsara*, one is still selfishly concerned with his own salvation, forgetting the suffering of others in *samsara*. In *nirvana* one may be liberated from the dualities of birth and death, right and wrong, good and evil, etc. But even then one is not liberated from a higher-level duality, i.e., the duality of *samsara* and *nirvana*, or the duality of the secular and the sacred.[29]

The dynamic interdependence of all things spoken of by Abe entails that the experience of nirvana must take place within, and in relation, to the world of *saṃsāra*.

Further, once we begin with the notion the interdependence of all things, we can see that there is a collective aspect to karma. Because our lives and actions are also always interconnected with the lives and actions of others in dynamic interrelations it is impossible to disassociate our own actions and their effects from those of others. Karma is thus an intrinsically social concept, since it implies that we must recognize the manner in which all persons affect the lives of others due to the interconnectedness of all reality. The doctrine of karma would on this reading lead naturally to the development of a positive social philosophy since it highlights the manner in which all lives and actions are interconnected. Overcoming our ignorance of the true nature of reality would involve becoming clear about the specific ways in which the personal, political, social, and economical are related in a dynamic fashion. Nor could one take a deterministic view about the situation of individuals within society since the collective aspect of karma entails that we are all responsible for the situation of others due to this ultimate, underlying interdependence.

To summarize, I think that if we begin our treatment of Buddhism, as Abe does, with the notion of *śūnyatā* that accents the dynamic interdependence of all things, then we can interpret certain other Buddhist concepts in ways that allow for the positive development of a Buddhist social philosophy. More specifically, I argued that doing so results in a non-individualistic reading of the doctrines of karma and nirvana. A recognition of the collective aspect of karma and the ignorance that prevents us from seeing the dynamic interdependence of all things would lead to a diagnosis of the specific ways in which our lives are connected to others within the social sphere and how our actions effect their lives. The attainment of nirvana and the escape from the bonds of karma would then be seen not as an individual's escape from the ordinary world, but as the realization of this interconnectedness that would allow persons to overcome self-interested behavior and to work creatively within the world of *saṃsāra*.

A second hermeneutic strategy adopted by Abe turns on the place that is given to nirvana and *śūnyatā* in the Buddhist's life scheme. We noted that typically the attainment of nirvana and the realization of *śūnyatā* have been taken as the goal or end of Buddhist action and reflection. And we also saw that difficulties arise concerning the viability of a possible Buddhist social ethic when they are treated in this manner because it seems to necessarily lead to an abandonment, both practically and conceptually, of the realities and exigencies of the social world. As such, in order to recover the social force of Buddhism, Abe accents that we must interpret the attainment of nirvana and the realization of *śūnyatā* not as the *goal* or *end* of Buddhism, but as the *ground* of Buddhist life. Abe states that "*śūnyatā* or nirvana should not be understood as a goal or end to be attained in Buddhist life, but as the ground or the point of departure from which Buddhist life and activity can properly begin."[30] We must now examine how this change of perspective might allow for the development of a concrete Buddhist social ethic.

There are two ways in which we can see how interpreting nirvana and *śūnyatā* as the basis for Buddhist life and not its end leads to a more

socially engaged form of Buddhism. First, we saw that interpreting the nirvanic experience as the goal of the individual Buddhist's practice led away from Buddhist involvement in the samsaric world of social reality. However, once nirvana is taken as the basis for Buddhist action and not its goal, we get a much different picture of the social implications of nirvana and *śūnyatā*. The important thing to see here is that the existential experience of nirvana should not be taken as the end-point of Buddhist life, which after all would merely result in a substantializing of nirvana itself, but is the awakening that allows the Buddhist to truly begin to act creatively in the world "without becoming entangled in the duality of pleasure and suffering."[31] The Buddhist point here would then be that as long as one is still caught up in self-attachments and the substantializing of things one can never act truly constructively in the social sphere, for "this absolutization entails a serious problem, because in practice it always is accompanied by an emotional attachment to the event and the people involved."[32] Only by completely freeing ourselves from such attachments can we offer social critique and work for social reform in a manner devoid of the kind of self-interest that is ultimately destructive of our attempts to alleviate social ills.

Similarly, when we take nirvana and *śūnyatā* as the ground and not the end of Buddhist life, we come to see that the attainment of nirvana and the realization of *śūnyatā* cannot represent an abandonment of the world of *saṃsāra*, but instead entails a new form of involvement within the world of *saṃsāra*. The world of *saṃsāra* is not overcome, rather as Abe puts it, "everything without exception is realized *as it is* in its *suchness* ... this does not, however, indicate that in Sunyata the distinctiveness of everything is eliminated."[33] Nirvana does not lead to a rejection of the everyday social world, but to a new way of viewing that world that allows one to act within it in transfigured ways. In terms of our theme of the possibility of a Buddhist social ethic this means that in experiencing nirvana we do not reject the everyday social world in which we live. Rather, in realizing its unsubstantiality we come to see that any particular social configuration is merely a contingent state of affairs and

by no means necessary.

However, even if following Abe we take nirvana and *śūnyatā* as the ground and not the goal of Buddhist life and on that basis come to see that this allows for the possibility of a way of acting creatively in the world without self-interest and attachment, we still need to provide some criteria on which such activity can be carried out. Before we noted that in giving up all substantial distinctions, critics charged that Buddhists had no grounds on which to judge one state of affairs or type of action more valuable than any other. What we need to see is how Buddhists might provide social critique and work for social reform without depending upon the usual types of ethical criteria. This is perhaps the most crucial issue in the development of any Buddhist social ethic, and Abe provides what I think is a suggestive and feasible response.

What criteria can the Buddhist provide for developing a positive social ethic? Abe notes that for the Buddhist *śūnyatā* provides:

> the ultimate criterion of value judgement. This judgement is to be made in terms of whether or not a thing or action in question does make ... one's self and other awakened. If a thing or action accords with the vow and act realized in the dynamism of Sunyata it is regarded as valuable, whereas if it does not, as "antivaluable."[34]

Here, it may sound as if Abe is contradicting his previous assertion that nirvana and *śūnyatā* are not to be taken as the goal or end of Buddhist life but as its ground. However, Abe is not here asserting that the realization of *śūnyatā* be considered as the *end* of the Buddhist's life, rather he is stating that it provides the *criteria* on which Buddhists are to judge their actions. As Abe puts it, the *value* of our actions is to be discerned on the basis of the extent to which they promote further awakening and enlightenment. In order to see how this criteria can function in concrete social situations, I will next turn to an examination of Abe's third interpretative strategy.

In discussing how enlightenment might function as the criteria for our concrete judgments, Abe introduces a crucial distinction between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of experience:

> My understanding of human existence consists of two dimensions: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal dimension refers to the socio-historical aspect of human existence, conditioned by time and space, whereas the vertical dimension indicates the metaphysical or religious aspect of human existence, trans-spatial and trans-temporal. The former is the realm of immanence whereas the latter is the realm of transcendence. These two realms are essentially and qualitatively different from one another and yet are inseparably connected with one another in the living reality of human existence.[35]

The horizontal dimension refers to the ordinary social and historical world with all of its contingent features and distinctions. The vertical dimension on the other hand refers to the metaphysical aspect of human existence in which we become aware of the ultimate nonsubstantiality and emptiness of reality. What is crucial to see is how the two dimensions are necessarily interconnected.

As stated above, the vertical dimension represents the religious realm and the awareness of the ultimate emptiness of everything found within the socio-historical realm. But precisely because it is a realization of the emptiness of the entities and values discovered in the historical dimension it is dependent upon that realm. Abe thus maintains that "the socio-historical dimension is indispensable as the *condition* or occasion necessary"[36] for the manifestation of the religious dimension. It is always only in relation to a particular set of social and historical conditions that we become awakened to the ultimate emptiness of reality. It is therefore incorrect to think that the realization of *śūnyatā* in the vertical dimension obliterates our involvement within the horizontal dimension, since such a realization is always the realization of the emptiness

of exactly that dimension. Abe writes in this regard that "the universal ground of human existence cannot be realized apart from the particular 'what' and 'when' as the condition or occasion."[37]

Given Abe's distinction between the horizontal and vertical levels of experience, and the manner in which they are interrelated, the plausibility of a Buddhist social ethics becomes more apparent. *Contra* the traditional criticisms, the realization of *śūnyatā* does not involve a complete abandonment of distinctions at the horizontal level. Abe notes that "in Buddhism the realization of the particularity and distinction of everything is indispensable as the condition for awakening to equality beyond distinctions."[38] The distinctiveness of the horizontal dimension is not abandoned in the realization of the absolute emptiness reality; after all, the realization that the entities and values discovered within the horizontal dimension of experience have no ultimate, independent reality can only take place if their particular and contingent reality is acknowledged. In the realization of *śūnyatā* one does not completely abandon the horizontal dimension of experience, rather a creative transfiguration takes place that allows the Buddhist to work creatively without substantializing that reality. In realizing the contingency of the horizontal dimension the Buddhist can act within a particular set of social and historical conditions while acknowledging their contingency, thus freeing them to work creatively for positive change without absolutizing any particular aspect of the horizontal dimension.

Further, given this interpretation of the horizontal and vertical realms of experience we can understand how the fundamental criteria of Buddhist action might give rise to positive social critique and reform. Earlier we said that the ultimate criteria of Buddhist thought and action was whether or not such thought or action led to awakening of oneself and others. The realization of emptiness, the vertical dimension of experience, is always an awakening in relation to a particular set of socio-historical conditions, the horizontal dimension, that are the necessary conditions for awakening. When this is taken into account one could argue that certain social configurations are more conducive to the expe-

rience of enlightenment than others. We saw that it was our attachments at the horizontal level of experience that prevent enlightenment. When persons live in abject social conditions they are much more likely, by necessity, to remain attached to the horizontal dimension of experience. For instance, when individuals have to struggle every day just to earn enough to supply their family with basic needs such as food and shelter these elemental needs will naturally become the prime focus of their life. On the other hand, individuals from social groups that do not have to struggle on a day to day basis to meet such material needs are able to detach themselves from the overriding attachment to these exigencies and thus become aware of the vertical level of experience. A Buddhist social ethic would consist in diagnosing and promoting those social configurations which are more apt to enable the most persons to free themselves from the overriding practical necessities of the horizontal dimension that lead to individuals' attachments with goods and situations in that realm. As the vertical level and the experience of enlightenment always take place in relation to specific socio-historical conditions, Buddhist social ethics must promote those socio-historical conditions that are most conducive to the enlightenment of all persons.

## IV. Conclusion

In this essay I have examined several prominent criticisms that have been directed at Zen Buddhism. The common feature of these criticisms is that they claim that certain Buddhist doctrines are incompatible with the development of any positive social ethic. Ascertaining the proper strength of such criticisms is particularly important within the Western context since the development of viable forms of Western Buddhism depends upon the ability of Buddhism to address the social issues that are at the forefront of contemporary discourse. If Buddhists cannot develop dialogical responses to these concerns, then Buddhism in all likelihood will remain on the periphery of Western cultural practices, repre-

senting only an exotic curiosity and not a vital resource. Criticisms of Buddhism's social applicability in a sense run to the heart of the issue of whether or not Buddhism itself is applicable to the contemporary Western experience, since an awareness of social problems has become central to the Western experience, both practically and theoretically.

While recognizing the force of such criticisms in relation to the traditional understanding of Zen Buddhism, I argued that the work of Masao Abe provides a new interpretive framework in which to reevaluate certain key Buddhist concepts in order to overcome the traditional criticisms and provide the basis for constructive social critique and reform on the part of Buddhists. In particular, I delineated three hermeneutic strategies adopted by Abe in order to uncover the positive social implications of Zen doctrine. These strategies involve a focus on the notion of interdependence central to the notion of *śūnyatā*, an emphasis on nirvana and *śūnyatā* as the ground and not the end of Buddhist life, and a distinction between the horizontal and vertical levels of experience. Such interpretive strategies, I believe, can provide the theoretical basis for a distinctively Buddhist approach to the questions of social justice that have become central to contemporary discourse in the West. In this way a truly Western Buddhism might be developed; that is a Buddhism that takes cognizance of and addresses those areas of concern that are of particular importance to those who are attempting to work for creative transformation in the West. While there is still much work to be done in explicating the ways in which Abe's interpretation of Zen Buddhism might be adapted in relation to specific social ills, I think I have demonstrated the theoretical plausibility of such projects.

## Notes

[1] John Cobb, Jr., "On the Deepening of Buddhism," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. J. Cobb and C. Ives (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 92.

[2] Abe is not alone in adopting this hermeneutic strategy in the face of the new global context. See for instance *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society: An International Symposium*, ed. C. Fu and S. Wawrytko (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

[3] James Whitehill, "Is there a Zen Ethic," *The Eastern Buddhist* 20 (1987), p. 12.

[4] Christopher Ives, *Zen Awakening and Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), pp. 103-104.

[5] Masao Abe, "The Problem of Evil in Christianity and Buddhism," in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. P. Ingram and F. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), p. 153.

[6] Winston King, "Self-World Theory and Buddhist Ethics," *Eastern Buddhist* 22 (1989), p. 24.

[7] For a historical survey of engaged Buddhism see Christopher Ives *Zen Awakening and Society*, particularly chapter 3.

[8] Lee Stauffer, "Is an Ethical Theory Possible Within Zen Buddhism?" *Southwest Philosophical Studies* 11 (1989), pp. 80-84.

[9] Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in *The Emptying God*, p. 38.

[10] Padmasiri De Silva, "Buddhist Ethics," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. P. Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 61.

[11] D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Second Series (London: Rider and Company, 1970), p. 270.

[12] Nyogen Senzaki and Ruth McCandless, *Buddhism and Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p. 13.

[13] Winston King, "Engaged Buddhism: Past, Present, Future," *The Eastern Buddhist* 27 (1994), p. 21.
[14] Winston King, "Self-World Theory and Buddhist Ethics," p. 23.
[15] Ibid., p. 16
[16] Ibid., p. 16.
[17] Masao Abe, "God, Emptiness, and the True Self," in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, ed. F. Franck (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 65.
[18] Christopher Ives, *Zen Awakening*, p. 17.
[19] Masao Abe, "Suffering in the Light of Our Time, Our Time in the Light of Suffering," in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, pp. 2-3.
[20] Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," p. 27.
[21] Christopher Ives, *Zen Awakening*, p. 2.
[22] Masao Abe, "The Problem of Evil in Christianity and Buddhism," p. 145.
[23] Lee Stauffer, "Is an Ethical Theory Possible Within Zen Buddhism," p. 81.
[24] Masao Abe, "The Problem of Evil in Christianity and Buddhism," p. 146.
[25] Masao Abe, "A Rejoinder," in *The Emptying God*, p. 173.
[26] Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," p. 39.
[27] Ibid., p. 40.
[28] Ibid., p. 41.
[29] Masao Abe, "God, Emptiness, and the True Self," p. 65.
[30] Ibid., p. 33.
[31] Masao Abe, "Suffering in the Light of Our Time, Our Time in the Light of Suffering," p. 3.
[32] Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," p. 52.
[33] Ibid., p. 29.
[34] Ibid., p. 58.
[35] Masao Abe, "A Rejoinder," p. 174.
[36] Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," p. 174.

[37] Ibid., p. 176.
[38] Ibid., p. 176.